

Abraham Lincoln papers

From Obadiah H. Platt to Abraham Lincoln¹, August 31, 1864

¹ Platt, a Missouri newspaper editor, was appointed an additional paymaster of volunteers in June 1861 and was dismissed on June 21, 1862.

St Louis. August 31. 1864

President Lincoln

I wish to present for your consideration some results of observation & experience, bearing upon measures & policies of the administration. I wish to place before you, not arguments, but facts, as the best proof to you of the effect of measures, and although you are flooded with essays & letters on various subjects, I trust you will deem this of sufficient importance to secure for it, a few moments attention. I have been connected with the St Louis Democrat as Editor & correspondent and my business has led me to constant intercourse with civil & military officers along the Mississippi and in the fields of military operations. I have therefore as I believe facilities for observing & learning facts not accessible to all, & I have no motive for the time & trouble of penning this letter, but the consideration that possibly they may aid, in what I know is the great burden of your head & heart, the best & wisest measures for suppressing this cursed rebellion and restoring the Union with tranquility & peace. If I could take you with me for a week where you could see for yourself the effect of civil & military regulations, your own observation would furnish you data for just conclusions, but withdrawn as you are from the field of operations in the West and perplexed by conflicting representations of interest or prejudice or passion it is not surprising your mind should be undetermined. The Democrat has strongly opposed and condemned, not you, but, certain measures of your administration, the time has now come after two years trial, to judge of those measures by their fruits.

It was fairly a question for argument at the beginning of the rebellion whether a severe or conciliatory policy was wisest & best. You adopted the latter, believing no doubt that the disloyal could be won back by conciliation & kindness. Has the result justified your hope. As the result of my observation I avow the opinion that this policy has not made a single convert, and has tended wholly to strengthen & encourage rebellion, and to weaken, paralise & discourage loyalists & the loyal cause. Let me illustrate by facts. There was in the interior of our State a considerable class minority of true Unionists and another class of ignorant people, who had no fixed opinion or feeling. The majority were disloyal in sentiment, and among them a few, virulent, and reckless men, ready for any violence or crime to aid the rebellion. When our armies passed over the state, the disloyal either

remained at home claiming to be peaceful citizens, or left their families, and hid in the brush, if not in the rebel army.

The disloyal were protected in their families & property, in pursuance of the conciliation policy. After the Union forces, passed away, those who were secreted returned to their homes. They had arms, and were able to furnish arms to their friends. Then commenced the systematic persecution of every person suspected of loyalty — they were robbed, by disguised rebels, their cattle & horses stolen, waylaid & robbed of their money, their crops destroyed & often they were shot down in the road by a hidden assassin. The loyalists found he had no protection, and could not live in the place, and finally the family with the father if not killed sought to fly, and in the night with the little they could carry, started on their wretched pilgrimage to beg among strangers. Soon our streets were filled with these miserable refugees, seeking among friends & kindred in other states if they had them, or from public charity the protection their own Government could not give them. The class of indifferent men seeing the way loyal men were treated, and the protection extended to the disloyal, followed the path of interest, & became professed traitors and many of them armed rebels. This case, is, an illustration of every neighborhood in the state except in the German Settlements. Several times our armies marched over the state and dispersed armed rebels, who scattered & hid away till the federals left and then returned to renew their infernal work. This process repeated in all parts of the state, and continued with increased persecution of all loyalists, one can easily calculate the growth of loyalty. It may be safely assumed that more than thirty thousand industrious & peaceful loyal citizens have been driven from the State & reduced from competence to beggary. In Arkansas, where I have been much of the time, the effects of the conciliation policy has been even worse than in Missouri, because we had a loyal State organisation supported by a large federal army, and a large & always reliable German population in several localities in the State.

A majority of the people of Arkansas had voted against Secession, and when Genl Steele² entered the state and Price³ was driven back to Camden, there was a large loyal population and there was a prevalent impression that rebellion was broken down in the state. It is within my personal knowledge that in the northern part of the State, a very large majority of the people were ready & desirous if assured of aid and protection, to organise & assist the federals in expelling from the state the violent & unprincipled traitors who remained. Then the Union sentiment predominated very generally in that part of the state but the people were unarmed. Genl Steele began his conciliation policy. Traitors were recd into favor & protected, and loyal men left to take care of themselves. The scenes of Mo. were repeated in Arkansas. Rebels in armed bands infested the state, & theft, robbery & murder of loyalists their constant occupation. Under this state of things, you cannot fail to see that a citizen of these states had no motive (except pure love of the Union) for loyalty. All his pecuniary & personal interest prompted him to be disloyal. The federals protected rebels & left loyalists to be

robbed & murdered by rebels. The loyalists of Arkansas are refugees or in their graves, and traitors are left in possession. We are much worse off today in these states than when Genl. Steele entered it. These are facts, notorious to all familiar with the current events and are illustrations of some causes & results elsewhere.

2 Frederick Steele

3 Sterling Price

—Now look for a moment at the probable & necessary results of an opposite policy. If it had been announced that every traitor to the Union was a public enemy, and that every secessionist was a traitor, and every traitor a criminal, who had no right to protection from the Government in person or property. That no such person would be tolerated within the Union lines, but driven into the rebel lines & their property confiscated. Under this policy the federals as they marched through the State would ascertain the open, unprincipled rebels, and drive them with their families before them, seizing their property. After they marched over the state, the chief elements of mischief would be gone. The loyal people would assist to find those remaining. It would be seen & felt that the Govt. fostered & protected loyalty & punished treason, that it did not regard or treat a traitor as, better or as good as a loyalists. Loyalists would have become bold, the sentiment would have increased & spread — and soon organisations formed to defend & protect themselves. Had this policy been adopted, the first Army that marched over Mo. & Arkansas, would have left a loyal state behind them, and what an untold amount of suffering, [and?] of life would have been saved. Had this policy been adopted (this however is mere opinion) Copperheadism would never had dared to show its head.

Growing out of this conciliation policy, has come other evils scarcely less in magnitude, and fraught with most deadly poison to the Union Cause. I refer to Treasury Regulations which permitted individual traffic in Cotton and Commercial intercourse with rebel states. Individual traffic in Cotton has been the greatest curse which ever fell upon a great & noble cause. It has corrupted & debauched, all who came in contact with it civil & military — and been the chief source of rebel supply. Thank God, that terrible scourge is, cut off as I hope for ever and Commercial intercourse so much restricted as to be of comparatively of little injury. I mention them as properly growing out of the conciliation policy. In this exposition of the effects of the conciliation policy, it was no part of my motive to cast censure upon the President. I have not one doubt that it was adopted from motives of the purest patriotism and dictated by the noblest emotions of the heart — that of benevolence & kindness. Had I not so believed I should not have troubled you with this letter. It is because I have abiding faith in the pure & simple patriotism, which influences his action and his single desire to do that which shall most effectually & certainly suppress the rebellion that I

have thought it my duty to communicate the results of my observation & experience. It is too late to remedy all the evils of this policy, but not too late to do infinite good by reversing it. To have it announced and known as the Government policy, that hereafter in the border states, secessionists within the federal lines are to be treated as public enemies and with their families banished from our territory and their property appropriated to Government use would create an enthusiasm, life and energy in the army & out of it, of which you can have no conception. The loyalists would feel like one relieved from the nightmare, so great is their discouragement & depression. It would be worth fifty thousand men to the Union army. I trust you will carefully consider this matter and act as you shall think for the public good. In my judgment the Amnesty proclamation⁴ has produced no good result, and has only been used as a convenient disguise for rebels to communicate with the "O. A. K."⁵ and to enabled unprincipled traitors to get within our lines to save their property or enter guerilla bands. If the conciliation policy is to be continued, you ought to retain General Steele, in the Arkansas department, for he has carried out that policy effectually. He is so highly esteemed by the secessionists that, (as the Editor of the State Democrat told me) they love him, and if put up for Governor he would get all their votes. He is very popular with all but the loyalists and the federal army. By them he is, as far as they dare execrated and denounced as a pro slavery democratic General, — precisely of the kind & quality of Genl. Buel.⁶ If however you are satisfied, that is an unwise policy, I should hope that you will put some General in that department who is heartily & earnestly in favor of that policy, which you wish to have carried out. Should it be of any interest to you to know whether my statements are reliable, I am known to Mr Seward in years past and with the Comr. of Pensions, our representatives &c. With earnest love for my Country & sincere respect for you, I am very truly,

4 A reference to Lincoln's December 8, 1863 Proclamation of Amnesty and Reconstruction. A draft of the proclamation is in this collection.

5 "O. A. K." is an abbreviation for the Order of American Knights. This was a secret organization devoted to aiding the Confederate cause.

6 Don Carlos Buell

O. H. Platt

I beg leave to make another suggestion to you. I have already stated — that the amnesty proclamation was taken advantage of by unprincipled rebels, to save their property, or to engage in Guerilla warfare. In the [exciting?] Canvass now commenced, for the presidency, it will be taken advantage of for another purpose, our State, Ky & Tenn. will be flooded by the worst species of

traitors under that oath in order to aid in the election of a Copperhead President. You know they are reckless & regardless of oaths or any thing else to accomplish their purpose. I hope you will not allow us to be born down by these villians in the border states, but help us to shut out disloyal votes. Surely time enough has been given to all who have any real love of the Union to return, and I submit that you owe it to the cause of the Union, as will as a just regard to your friends to revoke that proclamation, and keep traitors where they belong

Yours truly

O. H. P